

The Save Stony story: last chapter yet to be written

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Legislation designating Stony Creek a wild river is expected to flow quickly through the state House, but the measure could have rocky going in the Senate.

A bill is ready for House action following the state Department of Environmental Resources' recommendation that "legislation be enacted to designate the Stony Creek Corridor as a wild component of the Pennsylvania Scenic Rivers System."

The recommendation — next to last step in the battle to prevent Pennsylvania Power and Light Co. from building a pumped storage facility in the valley — was contained in a Nov. 14 letter from DER Secretary Clifford L. Jones to Speaker of the House H. Jack Seltzer.

Jeffrey E. Piccola, R-Harrisburg, who along with Joseph C. Manniller, R-Harrisburg, was the prime sponsor of the House bill, "assumes" the measure will be reported to the floor Tuesday by the Conservation Committee.

"Chances are very good the bill will be reported out and be passed by the House before it breaks" for the holidays Dec. 12, he said.

Piccola is "very optimistic" because "nobody has raised any objections to the legislation. Even Pennsylvania Power and Light has remained neutral on it."

Seltzer, R-Palmira, hopes "we can pass it before we break. I will do everything to expedite it along."

Sen. George W. Gekas, R-Harrisburg, whose district encompasses the 1.7-mile-wide, 16-mile-long area included in the study report, said he will "push for passage" of the bill when it reaches the Senate.

He said he foresees "no great obstacle" to passage of the bill since it is primarily a local issue.

But at least one senator — Clarence F. Manbeck, R-Fredericksburg — expressed some reservations.

Although Manbeck is from Lebanon County, where in 1977 commissioners backed the drive to Save Stony Valley, he has "mixed emotions" and is linking his support to reopening of the atomic power plant at Three Mile Island.

"I, of course, am in favor of reopening Units 1 and 2 at TMI, and if that happens, I'm all in favor of creating Stony Creek as a scenic project. Until then I will reserve my support."

All of which is why Dr. John A. Fritchey Jr., who along with Del Zimmerman of Annville RD 3 was among the first to initiate the fight to save the valley, isn't about to start celebrating until the bill becomes law.

"I'll rejoice when it's signed," said Fritchey, still a little worried about "how PP&L is going to fight this thing" despite the utility's vow it does "not want in any way to obstruct designation of Stony Creek as a Scenic and Wild River if it is determined that overriding environmental benefits will be served by taking such action."

Fritchey said, "We've had so many downs, and so few, if any, ups that it's very difficult to be optimistic until everything is in writing."

DER's recommendation marks a major milestone in the 13-year battle to prevent a pumped storage hydroelectric project from being constructed in the heart of the 35,000-plus acre wilderness area just a dozen miles north of Harrisburg where not too many years ago bears roamed and a person lucky enough still might catch sight of a coyote.

The battle began in 1966 almost as soon as PP&L announced plans to build the \$265 million hydroelectric plant in the uninhabited, roadless area which long has been a carefully guarded "secret" by fishermen, hunters and hikers looking for a place to "get away from it all."

PP&L, which eventually took in Metropolitan Edison Co. as a partner in the project, planned to build the plant on 1,702 acres obtained in a controversial land-swap with the state Game Commission in 1969. To obtain the land PP&L gave the Game Commission 5,469 acres of "more accessible" land in Middle Paxton, Wayne, Rush, and Jefferson townships that contained six miles of Clarks Creek.

If the project is discontinued the land is to revert to the Game Commission, which can keep the 5,469 acres.

The pumped storage project — originally scheduled for completion by the early 1980s — called for two reservoirs connected by a water tunnel. The 4.5-mile-long lower reservoir was to be formed by damming



Dr. JOHN A. FRITCHEY Jr. ... with twirling he did as fund raiser for Stony Creek Coalition.

Stony Creek about three miles above the chain at the Ellendale Forge entrance. A 1.25-mile-long upper reservoir was to be created in the depression between Stony and Sharp mountains, which form the northern boundary of the wilderness area.

The idea was that late at night or during the weekends, when demand for electricity was low, off-peak power would be used to pump the water from the lower reservoir to the upper storage reservoir. During periods of peak demand the water would be let down to the lower reservoir, turning a generator and producing electricity.

Under this plan, three kilowatts of electricity are needed to pump the water to the upper reservoir for every two kilowatts produced when it flows back down, according to PP&L.

But that's not what Fritchey of Harrisburg RD 3 was thinking about when he heard of plans to tear up

the valley where he, like his father, had been hunting and fishing for many years.

His father, also a physician and three-time Democratic mayor of Harrisburg, "used to go in there to fish many, many years ago, back around the turn of the century, when they had resorts there, such as Cold Springs."

Fritchey's father died "before I was a very big fellow," as the son says, and the two never ventured into the valley together. But the love of the outdoors was passed onto the son, who "started going up there about the time I started to drive a car, back in the 20s." Then, in turn, Fritchey's "kids used to like to go up there to hunt and fish."

He was thinking about such things as the 350-acre mudflat which would be created around the lower reservoir by periodic 50-foot fluctuations in the water level.

Fritchey, at that time, noted it was "particularly disturbing" that Stony Valley was "our last wilderness" and questioned if "we have a right to destroy" it.

He said the land to be destroyed "consists of...the very choicest ground, including marsh and woodland meadow. A rare rush grows here, as does a fine stand of American holly - in its most northerly extension. Thousands of mature trees shade the ground, beneath which are great stands of rhododendron and other shrubbery."

"The rare formation offers a last haven for migrating and resident birds and animals and there is still room here for mink, beaver, and even an occasional bear."

This is, he said, "A condition found elsewhere in only the wildest parts of the country."

But few people listened to Fritchey, and those who did "laughed and said you don't have any chance of stopping this thing."

Fritchey talked to representatives of the Sierra Club, the Audubon Society, hunters, anglers and, "God knows, everybody around here."

Fritchey even joined Trout Unlimited in an effort to enlist the aid of the Cumberland Valley Chapter but "got no help at all."

So about 1971, after conferring with TU's national headquarters, he formed the Dauphin Chapter, which had an initial enrollment of 12 members.

Still, for the next couple of years, Fritchey was ignored by most organizations and the press and seemed to be fighting a losing battle.

"It was frustrating," Fritchey said. "In the early days the Game Commission, the Fish Commission, your legislators, and many of your clubs were in favor of having PP&L build that dam thing."

Then in 1973 Bill Beck, who occasionally hiked up through the valley, joined the TU chapter at the urging of a friend and the two, recognizing the urgency of the situation, immediately set out to form the Stony Creek Coalition, predecessor of the Stony Creek Valley Coalition.

"I'm probably the only member who isn't a fisherman," Beck said.

Beck, co-chairman and spokesman for the coalition now composed of more than 50 organizations, said there were some uneasy moments during those early public meetings, such as the one held in the Linglestown American Legion Post home in March 1974.

"Some people belligerent to our side were at that public meeting. Workers from Three Mile Island were tipped off to the meeting by PP&L and they came in to disrupt us."

He said construction workers who hoped to find jobs building the pumped storage facility after they finished at TMI were given an opportunity to speak and then asked to leave.

The meeting also revealed there was enough interest in saving the valley and TU was joined by such organizations as the Dauphin County Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs, Dauphin County Anglers and Conservation, the Susquehanna Appalachian Trail Club, the Sierra Club, and the Audubon Society in the coalition.

But having the stream included in the scenic rivers system is somewhat of a bittersweet victory.

As the battle to save the creek gained steam and passed such hurdles as being given top priority for study and possible inclusion in the scenic rivers system, studies made, and public hearings held, more attention has been focused on the valley and a place once wild sometimes now is overrun with people.

"One of the problems connected with saving Stony Creek was publicizing it," Fritchey said. "This was our main problem when we started. No one knew about the place or gave a damn about it."

"We had to publicize the place, then get loads of people up there, which is bad, because now you go up and see trash strewn all around."

"But you have to put up with these things if you want to save the creek."

However, "those people don't walk very far, and if you get back far enough it's still wilderness."

He knows that from experience. He had been fishing and got caught by darkness and missed the trail when walking out.

"I didn't see any lights, hear any horns. It was a little frightening."